

Seven Priorities for the Effective Parent

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Do you ever feel like your brain might explode if you have to remember *one more thing*? It's no wonder—we've got a lot to remember! The password to access the computer. A code for voice mail. A PIN number for the ATM at your bank. Phone numbers at work, at home, in the car. And our child's at college—the phone number changed again this year!

Do you long for the good old days (maybe the mid 1980s or early 1990s) when you didn't have to answer the phone while driving, and you only found mail in the box at the end of your driveway—not in your computer, spewing from the fax machine, or in an overnight packet on your porch?

Parents certainly feel the pain brought by information glut. Everywhere we turn someone is offering more advice on how to do it right with our children. In this article, we will help you simplify your priorities as you craft the life of your preadolescent or teenager.

Let's pretend we are old friends who, after several years, have just bumped into each other while making connections at O'Hare Airport in Chicago. After exchanging greetings, you tell us your oldest child will soon be a teenager. We nod and smile—“Been there. Done that. Several times.”

“Say, what can you tell us about successfully raising a teenager?” you ask with a nervous laugh. “Some of our friends tell us it's horrible.”

We all look at our watches—30 minutes until you board your flight for Hawaii and we head back to Little Rock. You offer to buy the Starbucks coffee. Here's our best shot—seven guiding priorities to embrace every day of your child's preadolescent and adolescent years. The coffee is hot, your pen and notepad are ready; here goes.

Priority 1: Prayer

This one probably does not surprise you. But before you glance at your watch and start tapping your foot, *please consider carefully what we have gleaned.*

Pray regularly. Bring every concern, dream, and desire about your child to God in fervent, persistent prayer. (Luke 18:1–8 contains a great parable on persistent prayer that must have been for parents of teenagers.) Two of the best times to pray with your child are on the way to school (assuming you drive him) and at bedtime—regardless of age. Now that our teenagers drive themselves to school, we use breakfast for this prayer time.

Bedtime prayers can be more personal for each child. Pray for his future mate, relationships, activities, challenges, temptations, and heart for God. Don't assume that a teenager is too big for you to kneel beside his bed and stroke his face and pray.

Pray offensively. Before and after your child hits adolescence, pray for his peer group—that he will have at least one strong Christian buddy for the teenage years. Ask God to protect your child daily from others who would be an evil influence. Also consider asking God to help you spot your child doing things right so that you can encourage him in making right choices.

Pray defensively. On more than one occasion we have sought the Lord's help in removing a friend of questionable character from a child's life. From time to time we have felt that one of our teens might be deceiving us, but we could never be absolutely certain. In those situations we have asked God to help us catch him if he's doing something wrong. God seems to feel sorry for parents who pray this prayer! Pray when God brings your child to your mind. It may be at that very moment, your child is facing a circumstance of critical importance.

Pray with your child. It's easy for prayer to become an exclusive dialogue—you and God. Why not do what one mom, Nina, did with her teenage daughter, Natalie, and become prayer partners? Natalie's teenage years were filled with special moments in which she and her mom knelt together and prayed over Natalie's struggles and challenges.

Pray together as a couple. For more than 26 years of marriage we have ended each day in prayer together as a couple. No spiritual discipline has protected our marriage and our family more than this daily time of communion together with God.

Priority 2: Standards

Have you and your spouse talked about dating, driving, jobs, grades, curfews, friends, and after-school activities? The list seems endless at times. We promise this: *If you don't nail down your own convictions ahead of time, your teenager and his peer group will establish their own!* If you have not agreed as a couple upon guidelines (specific boundaries and standards for your child during pre-teen and teen years), your child will soon hit you with the divide-and-conquer strategy. Children are experts on whether dad or mom is the easy touch on certain issues.

Priority 3. Involvement

We are not suggesting that you become the ultimate soccer mom. That's not bad—being there at all of your child's activities—but involvement means much more than driving the carpool and never missing a dance recital. Involvement means crawling inside your child's head and heart. Involvement is moving from the outside to the interior of an adolescent's life.

Involvement means diving into the turbulent currents caused by emotions—the child's and the parent's. Soul to soul. Heart to heart.

Priority 4: Training

The best parenting is proactive, not reactive. The reactive parent stays in a defensive posture, continually reacting to a child's mistakes. A proactive parent goes on the offensive and does what is necessary to become the child's trainer. Effective training involves at least three parts.

First, *parents need to see clearly the goal*. They need to know what they are trying to achieve in their child's life. Second, *effective training involves repetition*. A Green Beret once told me, "As Green Berets, we train to learn what to do in every conceivable circumstance—over and over and over again. Then in times of battle we know what to do. It's just second nature to us."

That is a picture of what we parents should do. We train our children and instruct them in making the right choices in the circumstances they will face. And we do it over and over, until it becomes second nature to them.

Finally, *training involves accountability*. One of the major mistakes parents make is giving our children too much freedom without appropriate oversight. This is especially true if a family has more than two children. We tend to over-control our firstborn child and release the younger children prematurely.

My mom was the master at accountability during my teenage years. She demanded to know where I was and what I was doing. I can still hear her saying, "Where are you going? Who will be there? What time will you be home?" And my dad was right in there with her. The first night that I was allowed to go out in the car he wrote down the mileage on the speedometer and gave me a five-mile maximum limit.

Priority 5: Community

We have become increasingly convinced and alarmed that one of the most damaging changes that has occurred in recent years is the loss of community in raising our children. We used to look out for the children of others far more than we do now.

This type of involvement is rare today. In our age of tolerance, we have developed the philosophy that we have no right to tell another parent about a concern we have about his child. And our children suffer from our failure to be involved in the lives of others.

We've learned through experience how much we need the help of others to monitor and correct our children. Friends, true friends, have cared enough to courageously call and express a concern about something they've seen one of our children doing that they know we wouldn't approve of. Those are tough phone calls to make. And tough to receive. But in each and every case we've seen God use these circumstances to help us keep a child out of a threatening trap.

There is a natural community that we need to do a better job of tapping into for our children's accountability. It's your church and mine. Certainly this group of folks ought to have the right perspective on the value and worth our children possess. We are in this

thing together, and that should pertain especially to raising the generation that is the future of the church.

Priority 6: Direction

We have found that most Christian parents desire more than anything else to raise children who will grow up to love Jesus Christ and walk with Him. With that overall objective in mind, we have searched the Scriptures to discern what biblical goals we should aim for with our children. The four qualities we developed give us four clear goals to pursue as we mold our children. Nearly every issue or trap our children will encounter can be linked to a young person's need in one of four areas:

Identity: Every person is born with a unique, divinely imprinted identity. If we want to properly guide our children to a healthy self-identity, we must acknowledge and support the Creator's design in three key areas: spiritual identity, emotional identity, and sexual identity. We must also communicate with them one of the most important messages they will ever receive—"You are made in the image of God. You are one valuable child."

Character: From Genesis to Revelation, character development is a major theme of God's work in people. And it's one of the major assignments God gives us as parents. Character is how your child responds to authority and life's circumstances.

Relationships: None of us was intended to make a journey through life alone. We need the strength, comfort, encouragement, resources, and power provided by God and others.

Priority 7: Perseverance

Parenting is not a weekend project. We're talking years—the rest of your life, actually. Fortunately, adolescence does have a time limit, but we'll never make it if we have to see immediate results for our efforts.

Perseverance is the parenting quality that helps you keep doing all the other important things—the praying, training, and setting standards. You will get tired. You will experience pain. The ones we are sacrificing for—our children—will sometimes say and do things that hurt us deeply. They do that because they are still children, and "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child" (Proverbs 22:15).

At times we may have to endure even a broken heart, but we must not lose hope. Galatians 6:9 tells us. "And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary."

In thinking about the perseverance needed by parents, we smile and take heart at the pithy quote by the great English preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon: "It was by perseverance that the snail reached the ark." There you have it, our 30-minute summary, with probably a minute or two to spare.

These seven big ideas can make the difference between frustration and fruit in parenting preadolescents and teenagers. Have a great time in Hawaii!



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